The

CHRISTIAN BELIEF ABOUT CHRIST

BY

LUMSDEN BARKWAY

Bishop of St. Andrews, Dunkeld, and Dunblane

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A. R. MOWBRAY & Co. LIMITED
LONDON AND OXFORD
MOORHOUSE-GORHAM Co.
NEW YORK

109186
J330
B247

First published in 1942

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
A. R. MOWBRAY & CO. LIMITED, LONDON AND OXFORD
1924

THE CHRISTIAN BELIEF ABOUT CHRIST

THE Christian belief about Christ is summed up in the phrase: 'Perfect God and perfect Man.'

But is this of any importance in view of the crushing predicament with which we are faced to-day? When we have so many urgent claims on our attention, why should we spend time discussing claims which Christians make on behalf of Christ? The answer is that our view of Christ determines our view of everything else. A child is characterized by his insatiable curiosity, and his capacity for asking questions. An intelligent adult is also characterized by curiosity; but his intelligence may be gauged by his habit of asking the *right* questions. Among these perhaps the most pressing is this, 'What think ye of Christ?' because the answer decides the question as to whether life is worth living, for it determines our view of the destiny which

governs the universe. There is no logical standing-ground between trust in Christ as divine and despair of the universe as a senseless and cruel enigma.

You can work this out in a series of alternatives. First, either Christ was divine or else He was only human. Second, if He was only human then we have no authentic knowledge of God, and He remains unknown. And third, if God is unknown then we are at the mercy of an unintelligible and perhaps unintelligent force—the sport of a possibly capricious and malignant fate. The only hopeful clue to the confusion and horror of our present civilization is to be found at the Cross of Christ, if it is indeed God Who suffered and conquered there; but if this is not so, if the victim is only a man and nothing more, then the Cross would be the final reason for concluding that the world is the playground of evil force in which the best is doomed to destruction.

The one sure ground of hope is in the Christian belief in Christ as the Divine Lover of mankind, Who died on Calvary, rose again, and is still intimately present as the personal Friend of all who put their trust in Him. If

this is true there is nothing too difficult to bear with composure.

But what ground have we for holding on to so reassuring a conviction? May it not be the product of mere 'wishful thinking,' against which the psychologist so often warns us? As long as there remains any suspicion in our minds about this, our confidence is much too frail to afford any sure anchor for the soul. It is the object of this little book (written out of the experience of one who for many years thought the Christian claim incredible, and who knows every possible objection against it) to give some convincing reasons why the Christian creed is not only not unreasonable, but is the only reasonable explanation of all the facts of the universe. A persistent effort must be made to 'see life steadily and see it whole.' 'Steadily' and 'whole.' This convinced faith in Christ is not likely to be reached without steady effort; it is a prize to be won by those who do something to deserve it; and it needs as unbiassed a mind as possible to search for it, looking at all the facts and seeing them as a whole.

Our main business will be to examine

the historical evidence in the New Testament, on which the Christian belief in Christ is based. We must find out what His contemporaries thought about Him; what He thought about Himself; what He did; what, in fact, He was. But it is necessary to place this evidence in its right perspective, to approach it from the proper point of view, and to see it against the background of two thousand years of Christian experience. Therefore our study of the historical evidence must have a prelude dealing with presuppositions, and an epilogue dealing with conclusions.

I

IT is impossible to come to the investigation of any matter with a perfectly empty or completely unbiassed mind. Presuppositions of some kind are inevitable. On the nature of these presuppositions depends largely the nature of our conclusions. Nothing is more important than the right point of view. If we start off with a fixed conviction that the idea of an Incarnation is preposterous, then we shall be so biassed as to be unable to see the evidences for ourselves, and our conclusions will be rationalizations rather than reasoned convictions. But if we are led, on previous grounds, to admit that a truly loving and perfect God might conceivably act as Christians believe that He did, then we are ready to investigate the records with no initial 'stop' in our minds.

Let us put it very simply. The man who abandons the Christian faith almost certainly does so, not because it is not good enough, but because he says, 'It is too good to be true.'

Hardy's poem, 'The Impercipient,' is an illustration of this. Nowadays, in this country, there is not much arrogant but a great deal of wistful incredulity. Of the Christmas story men will say, 'It is a perfectly lovely story, if only it were true.' 'I should be perfectly satisfied, if only I could believe it.' Sometimes they will say, 'It seems to be perfectly fitted to human aspirations; but human desires too often manufacture human delusions.' One writer has expressed the mind of many by saying: 'God is like Jesus. If only you were perfectly sure that this was true, would you not be perfectly content in life and death?'

Now notice. In each case the word 'perfectly' or 'perfect' has been used. Perfection is an attribute which belongs to God alone. If there be a God Whom we can worship, He must be perfect in Himself; and that means, among other things, perfectly able to supply the needs of His creatures. Of Him nothing can be too good to be true; and if the gospel of the Nativity would perfectly satisfy our cravings, if it is a perfectly lovely *idea*, then it must be almost certainly a perfectly lovely *fact*; for your human imagination cannot conceive something

more perfect than a perfect God would perform. At any rate, whether or not you go as far as that, you will admit that it is a significant thing that we should speak of the Gospel story in terms in which the words 'perfectly' or 'perfect' almost inevitably occur. At least it makes us look at the record which contains it with more attention and readiness to accept it.

We can put this same truth a little differently by saying that belief in Christ is logically necessary for belief in a really good God. For if God be good He must be love; and His love must be at least as good as the highest human love. That is to say, it must be more than a mere cosmic benevolence, a vague amiability, or a good-natured tolerance. The best love that we know is not selfish but self-sacrificing, and may lead from one agony to another. It is only revealed in action; it proves itself by its eagerness to serve without thought of the cost. Only in the life and Passion of Christ have we conclusive evidence that the love of God is not less real than our own. If Christ be only the best of men, and no more, God has given no sign that He loves as we can love, at great cost to Himself.

The late Miss Lily Dougal put this truth in an impressive form, which is well worth recording here. She wrote:

Reason cries: 'If God were good, He could not look upon the sin and misery of man and live, His heart would break.'

The Church points to the crucifix and says: 'God's heart did break.'

Reason cries: 'Born and reared in sin as we are, how can we keep from sin? It is the Creator Who is responsible, it is God Who deserves to be punished.'

The Church kneels by the Cross and whispers: 'God takes the responsibility and bears the punishment.'

Reason cries: 'Who is God, what is God? The name stands for the unknown. It is blasphemous to say that we know Him.'

The Church kisses the feet of the dying Christ and says: 'We must worship the majesty which we see.'

The figure on the Cross is the most majestic that we know; His story is the loveliest that we have ever read; the conception of God which we gain from it is the most adequate to human need. And the ultimate verification of the Gospel is that it fits in with the world of experience as we know and live it to-day.

II

WHEN we come to the central division of our subject, and examine the grounds on which rests the Christian belief about Christ, it will be convenient if we divide it into three parts. (1) First, we shall survey the material we find in the New Testament and scrutinize its trustworthiness; (2) then, find out from it what His contemporaries thought about Christ; and (3) after that, ask if it is reasonable for us to accept their conclusions and risk our lives on their belief.

1. Broadly speaking the New Testament material is twofold: that which we find in the Epistles, and that contained in the Gospels. This is the right order in which to examine it. The Epistles were written before the Gospels, and the Gospels should be read in the light of the Epistles. It is sometimes mistakenly supposed that because the three Synoptic Gospels come first in the New Testament they present a simpler and more primitive view of Christ

than the more fully developed conception which we find in the Epistles. As a matter of fact, it is the other way round. The Gospels are not the earliest evidence of what the earliest Church thought about Christ. Before they had been composed the letters of the Apostles had been in circulation for some time, and their statements about our Lord are the most primitive which we have.

This dissipates a suspicion which lies at the back of some minds. It is based on the idea that the Christian belief in Christ may, after all, be only a 'Christ-myth' which gradually gathered round the 'legend' of Jesus as the true facts about Him slowly faded away from the memory of His followers. As time passed and there were no survivors left to correct the false impressions, more and more miraculous powers were attributed to Him and He became less and less human and more and more divine. But the documents in the New Testament refute this notion. One of the earliest of them, the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, was written less than twenty years after Christ's death. A still earlier letter is probably that of the Epistle to S. James. S. James is the least theological

of writers, while S. Paul is the prince of theologians; but both are entirely at one in their witness to the supernatural character and claims of Christ. As S. Paul went on writing he took pains to make increasingly clear to his readers his belief in the divinity of Christ; and this fully developed Christology was the possession of the Church before the Gospels were given to it.

But it is to the Gospels that we turn for details of the life of Christ, and therefore it is to them that we must direct our main attention as we try to discover for ourselves what He did and was. The question we want to settle is whether they are trustworthy. The extreme sceptic will say to you, 'Do you expect me to risk my life on a belief about things which happened two thousand years ago, the records of which are full of miracles, the evidence of which would hardly pass muster in a Court of Law?' But if you refuse to accept the Gospels because of their miraculous elements, what are you left with? The attempt to subtract the miracles from the Gospels has resulted in two entirely different theories which mutually destroy each other; and it is worth while to observe how they clear the way for an unbiassed

examination of the subject by cancelling each other out. (*a*) The first theory is the view that the real Person was a purely human figure, whose greatness has been greatly exaggerated; (*b*) the other theory is the contention that there never was such a person as Jesus at all, and that the whole of the Gospels is based on a myth which arose either from a misleading interpretation of the Old Testament or from an adaptation of heathen legends. These two theories cannot both be true; they may be said to cancel each other out. The Person Whom the Gospels describe is obviously a real Person, and the writers obviously and unanimously believe that He was divine. Are they trustworthy? In inquiring into their trustworthiness what we wish to ascertain is (*a*) whether they were well informed, and (*b*) whether they were accurate in what they report.

In answering the first of these questions let us examine the knowledge which we have about two of them—the second and the third. (For the purpose of this discussion we shall leave out the fourth Gospel, about which there is much disagreement, and confine ourselves to the first three, known as the 'Synoptics,' about

which there is very little disagreement among scholars. In dealing with this matter we cannot appeal to the titles of the Gospels. These are not part of the originals, which are anonymous, though by the time of Irenaeus (A.D. 180) the traditional authorship had been firmly attached to them.

As regards the second Gospel, Papias is our chief authority. He was Bishop of Hierapolis (a town in Phrygia) in the first half of the second century. He had excellent opportunities for knowing men who had known the Apostles. Ephesus was not far away, and there S. John had lived until extreme old age. S. Philip had settled in Hierapolis, and Papias knew his two daughters and records what he had heard from them. He also met persons who had known several of the other Apostles, and, as he says, he inquired diligently from them what the Apostles themselves had said. This is the information he obtained from one of them about the second Gospel: 'Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately everything that he remembered. . . . For neither did he hear the Lord, nor did he follow Him; but afterwards, as I said, attended Peter, who

adapted his instruction to the need of his hearers, but had no design of giving a connected account of our Lord's discourses. So, then, Mark made no mistake while he thus wrote down some things as he remembered them; for he made it his one care not to omit anything that he heard, or to set down any false statements therein.' The value of what Papias says is very great, for there can be no valid reason for doubting it. It is obvious, therefore, that the second Gospel consists largely of S. Peter's own reminiscences, and he is a first-hand authority.

As to the third Gospel we can glean no knowledge from Papias; but practically all critics of any repute are agreed that it was written by the author of the Acts of the Apostles, and that this man was S. Luke, the companion of S. Paul; so that, in reading it, we are not reading an anonymous book, but one about whose author we have considerable knowledge. He stayed at Caesarea during S. Paul's imprisonment there, and, as we know, had many other opportunities of gathering authentic information about our Lord's life. S. Luke gives invaluable insight as to how he set about his

composition. In his illuminating preface, as Bishop Gore remarked, 'we see that he claims no more than the necessary qualifications for writing good history—an honest intention, careful inquiry, and opportunities of access to first-hand authorities as well as to already written records.'

It is obvious that neither the first nor the third Gospels are made up of what we would call *original* writing. Their authors are unashamedly plagiarists. It is a device of which we disapprove nowadays, but which was then thoroughly reputable. (In modern newspaper language, their work was chiefly done with scissors and paste.) The bulk of what we find in the first and third Gospels has been lifted bodily out of other people's manuscripts; and it is clear that the writers had two main documents before them. In verse after verse we find them recording the same incident or piece of teaching in almost identical language. One of these two documents from which they copy is the Gospel of S. Mark. All except thirty verses of S. Mark is reproduced by one or both of the first and third Gospels. But besides S. Mark these two Gospels have also a large

amount of material in common. For this again a common source must be assumed. The letter 'Q' is used by scholars to denote this lost document. We cannot say anything very definite about the exact character of this source. It is impossible to tell how much, if any, of the material found only in one of the Gospels comes from 'Q,' nor how much of it remained unused by either of them, and is therefore lost to us. What seems indubitable is that the first and third Gospels used it as a repository of Christ's teaching, while S. Mark is their chief source for His miracles and deeds. But besides S. Mark and Q, S. Luke had other material. He expressly tells us that many had written before himself. He obviously possessed one rich source which he alone reproduces, from which he got the priceless parable of the Prodigal Son. Further, he seems to have had access to information regarding our Lord's Mother and her circle, which he alone makes available for us.

When you come to think of it, it is obvious that there must have been many written sources before our Gospels. In an age of writing, nothing would be more natural than for those

interested in our Lord to say, 'Let me write that down.' Notes must have been made for the use of early Christian preachers, and to spread the knowledge of Jesus in newly-established Churches. Consequently we can understand the truth of S. Luke's remark that many took a hand in drawing up narrations, and it was from these narrations that the Evangelists drew when they set about composing the little collections of reminiscences which we know as the Gospels. They are in no sense 'biographies' of our Lord. Rather are they collections of some of His most precious doings and sayings. The point is that they are well-authenticated reminiscences, much talked about in the early enthusiasm of the Church when everything relating to the Master was of living interest. During the ten days' retirement in the Upper Room, after the Ascension, when the company shared their experiences, many of these recollections must have been formulated, perhaps in the very shape in which we now have them. At any rate, what seems undeniable is that the Evangelists had no lack of material when they undertook to write their Gospels. They were well informed.

The second great query is, What use did the Evangelists make of the information which they had? Did they deal with it honestly, or did they 'doctor' it in the interests of some theory of Christ's Person, or for any other purpose? When we ask that, what we are really concerned about is the portrait of Christ which they give us. Is it a true representation of His character? Small details do not greatly matter, as long as the main impression is accurate. Have they told us the truth about Him?

In answer to that, the first thing to say is that they meant to. They tried to be honest, for really they had little temptation to be otherwise. If their stories were falsehoods they gained nothing by telling them. We can generally find a rational motive behind every deceit, but in this case there is no motive, and hence presumably no deceit. The proclamation of Christianity brought to its adherents no worldly benefits, but in many cases contumely, persecution, and death.

Further, it may be said that the Evangelists not only did not but could not have invented the character which they portray. A few details might not be beyond the reach of their imagina-

tions, but the character as a whole was quite beyond their capacity of creation. The picture of Christ contained in the various traditions is curiously self-consistent; and this is one of the first tests of truth—a very severe test in this case when the Gospel portrait is a mosaic pieced together from so many different sources. Its self-consistency is only explainable on the supposition that it is a true copy of an actual original.

The Gospels picture Jesus from different points of view, and tell His story with a different purpose in mind: the first is predominantly Jewish, the second Roman, the third Greek; but in spite of these different standpoints it is the same character in them all, showing (to use another metaphor) that they are photographs, not fanciful works of art. As we shall see later on, they reflect a character which is not only unusual but unique. Wide, many-sided, and completely balanced, He is an individual, and yet more than an individual, because His personality is universal in its range. The conclusion of John Stuart Mill was that the disciples of Jesus could not have created His figure, for His character is absolutely above the

moral consciousness of His followers; and Theodore Parker only put that a little more epigrammatically when he said: 'It would take a Jesus to create a Jesus.' Is it conceivable that His first disciples, men of quite common mould, fishermen, tax-gatherers, and hide-bound Jewish traditionalists, could have manufactured this ideal Figure? If they had attempted it, how different would have been the result. (The difference may be exemplified by contrasting the restrained account of the Synoptics with the puerile exaggerations of the Apocryphal Gospels.)

This is not a rhetorical flourish in lieu of sober argument. Here is a statement of it by Dr. Swete, one of the most sober and precise of New Testament scholars:

> The Synoptic Christ calls Himself the Son of Man, a name which is once or twice given Him by His followers. He reveals His Messiahship only by degrees, and not publicly until just before the end. He lives with the Twelve on terms of intimacy; Peter once even ventures to rebuke Him. His Transfiguration is the one occasion of which His superhuman glory is revealed, and the three witnesses are forbidden to speak of it during His life-time. He is 'meek and lowly in heart'; He is at home with the

poor folk and little children; He sends the rich empty away; adoration is rarely offered to Him; He does not even accept the title 'Good Master' without protesting against a possible misapprehension. This is not such a conception of Christ as could have originated in the Apostolic age. Still less was it suggested by Jewish expectations. A Messiah who refused a crown, who lived the life of an itinerant teacher, who suffered the death of the Cross, was not such a Messiah as any Jew of that time looked for or desired. Whence, then, came the picture of the Christ which the three Synoptic Gospels consistently offer? I see no escape from the conclusion that it was drawn from life. The Central Figure of the Gospel story, no less than the surroundings, bear the stamp of truth.[1]

Dr. Glover, in his *Jesus of History*, makes the same point:

The Gospels reveal much about Jesus that in contemporary opinion would degrade Him—sighs and tears and fatigue, liability to emotion and pain, friendship with women.

Dr. Swete calls attention to the fact that the particulars which the Gospels give of the surroundings of Jesus increase our reliance on their accuracy. It would take much too long

[1] *Critical Questions*, p. 51.

to examine all the details which prove the precise truthfulness of the information which they give; but it will be enough to point out that in the first century Palestine was passing through great changes; for example, affairs before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 were quite different from what they were afterwards; and a careful examination of the Gospels shows that these changes are reflected without mistake. Again, early Christianity was predominantly urban: the atmosphere of the Gospels is almost entirely rural. The state of things described in the Gospels is that of the time of Christ; and the only explanation is that the traditions contained in the Gospels are those of our Lord's contemporaries. Still more impressive is the fact of the marked difference between the theology of S. Paul and the religious teaching in the Gospels. Nobody can fail to observe the difference. Now had the Evangelists been inventing their figure of Christ they would undoubtedly have done so in the fashion of thought which S. Paul had introduced, for, as we have seen, he wrote before the Gospels, and his theological point of view would almost inevitably have found a prominent place in their

contents. Their interpretation of Jesus would have been coloured by Pauline presuppositions. But, as a matter of fact, the traces of such colouring are almost negligible. The use of the phrase 'Son of Man' in the Gospels is almost proof enough by itself of the writers' accuracy: there the word is constantly found, whereas it never once occurs in the Epistles. The same is almost equally true about our Lord's favourite subject, 'The kingdom of God.' This contrast with Pauline teaching is one striking piece of evidence regarding the entire independence of the Gospels from later influence, and hence of their trustworthiness and accuracy.

2. If we now agree that we can with safety use the material in the New Testament as authentic evidence of what the earliest Christians thought about Christ, let us go on, according to our plan, to examine the nature of their belief.

It is both interesting and important to try to see for ourselves the impression which our Lord made on His contemporaries. As has been said, it is impossible to construct a biography of Christ. The Gospels are only collections of reminiscences, and they make no attempt to trace the chronological order of

events or to describe the gradual development of His personality or His purpose or His plans. We do not know, and have no means of finding out, the exact date of His birth, or of His death, or the length of His ministry. We are uncertain about the time of the cleansing of the Temple, of the sending out of the Twelve and of the Seventy. Still more obscure is the central question as to how widely our Lord's Messiahship was recognized before His death.

But these uncertainties do not affect the general impression we get of the impression which Christ made on those who came into contact with Him. Here certain facts are clear and indubitable. He obviously lived a truly human life; and it is not impossible to give an outline of His ministry as He lived it out very much in the public eye. He was brought up in an undistinguished highland village, which seems to have had an unsatisfactory reputation; and here He grew up as a country lad, learning a trade and practising it, and developing not only in body but in mind from His association with Jewish companions and teachers. A new stage began in His career when He was baptized by a reforming preacher, whose fervid exhorta-

tions and denunciations made him a conspicuous figure of the time. After this He Himself became a preacher of such a novel kind that His Name was for a time on every one's lips. He moved from place to place, like John Wesley on his evangelistic tours, leaving behind Him not only a reputation for His goodness but a trail of grateful people who had benefited by His marvellous healing. His teaching astonished and thrilled them because it was so different from anything they had heard before. He had three great topics to which He referred again and again.

(i) He spoke of God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul. This sounded strange to his contemporaries, as it is distasteful to the Nazi leaders in Germany. It gave to life a new worth, and to all its experiences, joyful or sad, a new significance:

> The value of a truly great man consists in his increasing the value of all mankind. It is here, truly, that the highest significance of great men lies: to have enhanced, that is, to have progressively given effect to human value, to the value of that race of men which has risen up out of the dull ground of nature. But Jesus Christ was the first to bring the

value of every human soul to light, and what He did no one can any more undo.[1]

(ii) Closely connected with this was His insistence on the 'Higher Righteousness' and its inwardness. Love is the supreme law, and sins against it are those which He particularly abhorred. There were three things which Christ seems to have hated most: a narrow, unsympathetic self-regardingness; insincerity; and cool, calculating worldliness.

(iii) And a great part of His teaching was taken up with the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Always He took for granted His own supreme place in it; and therefore His words about the kingdom cannot be dissociated from His words about Himself. He knew Himself to be the Messiah, and He had no hesitation in making immense claims about Himself and immense demands on His followers.

They were, to all outward appearance, a pathetically undistinguished band, and until His power took hold of them after His death, extremely unreliable. An inner circle of men went about with Him on His tours, learning

[1] Harnack, *What is Christianity?*

from Him and coming more and more to 'sense' the strange quality of His personality and to discern the disconcerting difference between their own mean and shabby characters and His supernormal loftiness and nobility of heart. However much they loved and trusted Him, they were, sometimes uneasily, aware of the gulf of goodness that separated them from Him; and gradually they were being prepared for the fuller discovery of what He was that only came to them after His bodily presence had been removed.

For His career ended in an apparently untimely fashion. In the full vigour of His youth He realized that only through death would His work be accomplished. Rejected by His people He gave His life on their behalf. It is most important to see that He did not regard His death as a martyrdom, but as an achievement. He did not go to His execution as a reluctant victim feeling that His life had been cut short, but in order to consummate the work He had come to do.

But, according to the evidence furnished not only by the Gospels and the Epistles but also by the fact that the Name of Jesus is still remem-

bered, something quite extraordinary occurred after His death:

> The little band of followers, far from dispersing and sinking back into their former obscurity, received new impetus and soon went out to win others. They were convinced that Jesus was not dead. In a way which we cannot understand as clearly as we might desire, they had been assured that He was alive and in immediate (though spiritual) contact with them. Much more really than in the days of His flesh, He was present as helper and friend. He was victorious over death, and was alive for evermore.[1]

The above is a summary review of what the Gospels tell us of the history of Christ's life. When we go to examine the record in greater detail, in order to find out what the earliest Christians believed about Christ, it is possible to observe, without much difficulty, how the full implications of our Lord's personality were gradually discovered by His disciples. As is the normal method of God's self-disclosure, it was conditioned by men's capacity to apprehend it. Without being too epigrammatic we may say that the final truth about Christ was not so

[1] W. N. Pittenger, *The Approach to Christianity*.

much a disclosure on His part as a discovery on theirs. It was not forced on minds unprepared to accept it; but by a divine self-restraint Christ concealed from them the staggering truth about Himself, until in the end it was an unescapable inference which their minds were led to draw through their experience of all that they had learned in their long and intimate association with Him.

To begin with, they accepted Him as a mortal being like themselves, a man indeed, though a very remarkable one. They regarded Him as a rabbi, and became His disciples. Their experience of Him as a teacher led them to see that He was on a different level from the Jewish rabbis: He could not be less than a prophet. Later on, their opinion of Him reached a higher stage, and at Caesarea Philippi, in the last weeks of His life, through their spokesman, Simon Peter, they acknowledged Him to be the long-looked-for Messiah. Before His death that was the highest category which they would use to describe Him. For a short time His crucifixion shattered that conception of Him, and for some tragic hours they felt almost forced to look upon Him as an impostor. But with

His Resurrection not only was His dead body raised from the grave, but His disciples' opinion of Him was also raised to a power and intensity unreached before. They now identified Him with the 'Suffering Servant,' described by Isaiah, Who had died for the sins of the people; and at last reached the conclusion, to which all their experience of Him inevitably led them, that He was indeed 'Emmanuel,' 'God with us,' manifest in the flesh.

Step by step this final position was attained. It had become an inevitable conviction before the Apostles set out to conquer the world for Christ, though it was as yet very incompletely formulated. It had still to be fitted in with the general framework of human knowledge, and this process took a long time. It occupied the minds of the Church's thinkers during the first few centuries of her existence; and it was because of their success that she succeeded. Dr. T. R. Glover has explained the gradual triumph of the Church by saying that her members not only 'out-lived, and out-died, but out-thought their contemporaries.' They presented to thoughtful and inquiring minds a view of God and the universe more logically

satisfying than any other: and this view was based on their belief in the Deity of Christ. It was expressed in the Church's summaries of her belief, known as 'creeds,' and reached its fullest formulation in the document known as the Creed of S. Athanasius, where our Lord is described as 'perfect God and perfect Man.' This is the foundation stone of the Church's existence, and on it her vitality depends. The Incarnation is the supreme fact of the world's history; on it rests the whole body of Christian thought and conduct; and from it comes the whole motive power of the Christian life. Mr. Gladstone summed up the testimony of the universal Christian consciousness in his well-known words, 'All I write, and all I think, and all I hope is based upon the divinity of our Lord, the one central hope of our poor wayward race.'

3. This is so stupendous and momentous a conviction that we must now spend time in inquiring what grounds we have for belief so far-reaching in its claims and interpretations. It will be enough if we follow three lines of investigation: the witness of His character, of His claims, and of His Resurrection.

(*a*) We begin with the one which is likely to make the most persuasive impression on the Western mind. S. Paul says that when the Jews looked for proofs they asked for signs, and the Greeks demanded wisdom. But the modern man is sceptical about miracles and is not usually interested in philosophy. He is, however, keenly interested in character, and has a shrewd eye for summing up a man. Tennyson may have taken too rosy a view of a man's readiness to pay tribute to goodness when he said, 'We needs must love the highest when we see it,' but at least he was expressing the truth that there is something in us which responds to the appeal of a noble character. And probably the surest road to a discernment of the fact that Christ is perfectly divine is to see that He was humanly perfect.

This line of approach is the more convincing because the record of our Lord's character is its own evidence of its truth. It was beyond the power of human imagination to invent it. Something has been already said about that; but perhaps it is not superfluous once again to insist that the picture of Christ in the New Testament went far beyond any ideal which

was accepted at that time. Who among His followers, as J. S. Mill asked, was 'capable of inventing the sayings ascribed to Jesus, or of imagining the life and character revealed in the Gospels'? Or as Professor Mackintosh put it, 'No miracle of Jesus equals the miracle of His sinless life. To be holy in all thought and feeling; never to fail in duty to others, never to transgress the law of perfect love to God or man, never to exceed or to come short—this is a condition outstripping the power of imagination and almost of belief. Here is a casement opening on a diviner world.'

'Moral perfection' is a better term to use rather than 'sinlessness' when thinking of His character; for the word 'sinless' is unattractively negative, and even if a negative could be proved, absence of vice is not necessarily perfection of virtue. But though discarding 'sinless' as an adequate adjective to describe His character there is this to be said for it, that it does express the truth that there was nothing in any part of our Lord's life to hinder or hamper Him in His service of God and men; He was cramped by no such hesitancies as are inevitable in *our* dealings with others.

The earliest portrait of Christ in the New Testament is that given by S. Paul, and the light which in his Epistles he sheds on Christ's character illuminate the picture which we find in the Gospels. It is uncertain whether S. Paul ever saw Jesus in the flesh, but he was fully and accurately informed about Him and was well acquainted with His first disciples' thought of Him. S. Paul knew S. Peter intimately, and also S. James, the Lord's brother, and therefore what he says about Jesus is quite obviously authentic evidence. As Professor N. Micklem has said:

S. Paul rarely quotes a saying of Jesus or refers to any event in His life apart from the Crucifixion; but he affords a picture of the character of Jesus at once the earliest, the clearest, and the most authentic. Again and again he indicates what will be the character of the Christian man in whom the Spirit of Jesus, or the character of Jesus, repeats itself. The portrait is indirect, but it is unmistakable. When, as in 1 Corinthians xiii or Romans xii, S. Paul described the 'fruits of the Spirit'—that is, of the Spirit of Jesus—we see clearly what Jesus Himself must have been like. Thus the portrait of Jesus as it is implied in the Pauline writings is the proper and objective norm whereby the later traditions of the

Gospels may be tested. This norm rules out at once as morally impossible many of the recent Lives of Jesus.[1]

There is a certain, quite understandable, prejudice in men's minds against the idea of holiness. It suggests to them sanctimoniousness, and has become associated with pietism and lack of virility. But the true meaning of holiness is 'wholeness,' an all-round and perfectly developed character. No man known to us in history is within measurable reach of this ideal condition, and in our own experience we daily lament our psychological incompleteness—our infantile attitudes and repressions, our self-conflict and inner disharmony, our imperfect adaptation to reality, to sex, and to society. We are all more or less provincial in our outlook, and unbalanced in our development, with certain peculiarities which we call idiosyncrasies. When we examine the portrait of our Lord, how different it all is! He has no idiosyncrasies; and instead of His character being unbalanced and lop-sided we are aware of a singular harmony and completeness which gives

[1] *Mysterium Christi*, p. 152.

its individuality a strangely universal aspect. Indeed a book has been written with the title, *The Universality of Jesus*, and in it the late Dr. Johnston Ross says:

> The Christ of Whom I read in the Gospels is neither specifically strong nor specifically tender; neither merciful to the exclusion of justice, nor severe without compassion: mild and gentle, He is yet equally courageous and noble. The features of no one special type of goodness monopolize His character; He seems to include and to bring to perfection in Himself every conceivable type of goodness, and to belong to all time, and to be at home in every age and place: the local, the temporary, the accidental fade out of sight as I look on Him, and there shine out the lineaments of the Universal and the Eternal.

It is this universality of His character which has made it possible for those who have attempted to write lives of Christ to present their one-sided interpretations of His personality, by picking out a single aspect of His character to the exclusion of the rest. It is both grotesque and pathetic to observe how they have dressed Him up in the guise which they most admire. He has been saluted as 'Impera-

tor' and 'Commander-in-Chief' by Tertullian and General Booth respectively. He Who 'came eating and drinking' has been depicted as an emaciated ascetic. He Who refused to arbitrate in disputes about property has been turned into a kind of Socialist agitator. The fact is that He was so many-sided that complete justice has never been done in any attempt to portray Him.

Perhaps it is worth while to delay a little longer over this point in order to dispel an all-too-prevalent impression about Him, which is largely due to our most unfortunate misapprehension in regarding the true nature of love. I think it was Nietzsche (in many ways the evil genius of the modern world, to whose influence the corruption of the German mind is partly due) who first disseminated the idea that Christian love is really a weak form of benevolence; and this, in combination with sentimental German religious art and sugary religious verse, has produced that caricature of His character which makes us think of Him as 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,' a rather pathetic and ineffective figure whom we are

more inclined to pity than to adore. Others besides Blake have had reason to cry:

> The vision of Christ which thou dost see
> Is my vision's greatest enemy.

But this emasculated version of Christ's character is no vision at all, but a delusion begotten of an impoverished mind. The Christ Who moves with commanding force through the Gospels was no merely amiable figure, mildly benevolent, but one who impressed those who knew Him with a sense of awful power held in restraint. This royal greatness of character is the more impressive when we notice that it is never so patent as in circumstances which seemed utterly to disguise it, during the last hours of His life when His enemies hunted Him as a criminal to His death. Even in the guise of a felon He impressed and troubled the hard-bitten Roman governor; when finally degraded upon the Cross with His Body almost battered out of recognition, the young companion by His side recognized His supernormal majesty and pleaded for a place in His kingdom; when it was all over, and the humiliation was complete, the centurion added his

tribute, 'Truly this was the Son of God.' The union of strength and tenderness in Him has given a unique character to His personality, and the more it is studied the more impressive is the fullness of His manhood. This is the first line of evidence confirming the belief of the early Church in His divinity; because He is seen to be humanly perfect, the only logical conclusion is that He is perfectly divine.

(*b*) With this realization of His harmoniously balanced, sane, and completely integrated personality in your mind you are now ready to follow the second line of evidence, for you are prepared to admit that such a person could neither be the victim of delusions nor an impostor spreading lies. You are forced to give credence to what He thinks and says about Himself. He makes the most bewildering claims. Now it quite certainly follows from our conclusions regarding His uniquely perfect character that He did not think or say these things because He was a megalomaniac with absurd notions of His own importance. You must listen, with an awed mind, to the extraordinary demands which He put forward. They engage your attention; when you take in what they

imply they compel not merely your homage but your adoration. If a mere man made them they would only excite pity or disgust in your mind. The fact that they do not is the evidence that consciously or unconsciously you recognize Him to be God. His character and His claims are a unity; they confirm one another.

This attitude of serene self-possession and complete assurance of His right to a position of the highest worth is not only evidenced in one or two striking sayings which might conceivably be explained away, but the whole of His ministry is based on His divine self-consciousness. He invariably carries Himself with an authority which is more than man's, and it appears in all sorts of indirect ways. For instance, notice our Lord's strikingly emphatic use of the first personal pronoun. The original Greek brings this out clearly; the English translation obscures it. When our Lord heals the lunatic child, He says, 'It is I that charge thee: come out of him.'[1] When He answers the centurion's request for help, He says, 'It is I Who will come to heal him.'[2] In sending out His disciples, He says, 'Behold, it is I Who send you.'[3]

[1] S. Mark ix. 25. [2] S. Matt. viii. 7. [3] ibid., x. 16.

With such a character as His this self-reference must have been based on indubitably proper grounds; it is not the conceit of a charlatan. And the name He chose for Himself indicates quite clearly what He felt Himself to be. All through the Gospels He speaks of Himself as 'the Son of Man'; and in using this phrase He seems to put Himself forward as 'the Representative Man,' as one who gathers up in Himself all human nature. But while representing human nature He was far more than one among others. He knew Himself to be distinct and unique. It is noticeable that even in closest association with His followers He sets Himself apart from them. He distinguishes between the two senses in which He and they were Sons of God. Thus, He taught them to use the Lord's Prayer, and to say, 'Our Father.' He Himself prayed, 'My Father'; but He did not join with them in saying the prayer He taught them. In the same way He said, 'I go unto My Father and your Father, to My God and your God,' not to, 'Our Father and our God.'

Notice again how his super-normal claim comes out in the way He sets aside the Old

Law in favour of His own pronouncements. In the Sermon on the Mount He said that He came not to destroy but to fulfil; and then, with complete assurance, remarks, 'Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time . . . but I say unto you.' The Sermon begins with His re-interpretation of the Old Law: and it ends with His claim to be the final Judge of men, which He made again and again.

Nothing can remove from the Gospels this super-temporal Figure of Christ. All humanitarian representations of Him as the gentle dreamer of Galilee, among the lilies and the children, are egregiously inadequate in view of the awe-inspiring portrait which confronts us in the New Testament. Only by deliberate violence to the evidence can we evade the fact that all the teaching of Jesus, with its mysterious paradoxes, springs from His consciousness that He, the Galilean, is also the future Judge of the world, the Lord of the living and the dead. In the light of His own self-knowledge we see Him, not only among the sick and the sinners, compassionately merciful, but on the judgement-seat of God; He is not merely the Teacher and the Prophet, but the Lord of the ages, on

Whose verdict depends the fate of the world.

That is what Jesus thought about Himself and claimed for Himself. If He was not truly divine, what can we think about Him? The answer to that most pertinent question has been put by Dr. Liddon with shattering lucidity. If Jesus is not what He claimed to be, then—

> He is not a humble nor an unselfish man. Nay, He is not even sincere. . . . The choice really lies between the hypothesis of conscious and culpable insincerity, and the belief that Jesus speaks literal truth and must be taken at His word.

(*c*) But there is still a third line of evidence which persuades us to believe in the divinity of Christ—the witness of His Resurrection. This is the evidence which convinced and converted His first disciples. The faith in His divinity was not, in the first instance, based upon a consideration of His life. For three years His friends had lived with Him and yet not been convinced of it. It was not to His teaching, or His character, or His self-consciousness that the faith of the Church was directed, but to His Resurrection. It was this that the early missionaries proclaimed as the foundation of all that

they believed and hoped. And we can readily understand the reason for this. We, too, will agree that if Christ did indeed prove Himself stronger than man's last enemy, this must be accepted as a proof of the claims which He made for Himself.

If the Easter story be true it proclaims God's witness to the authenticity of Jesus, and sets the divine approval on His life and death. This is how the New Testament thinks of the Resurrection—as a divine declaratory act which God wrought in order to advertise the true nature of Him Who had been so misunderstood and humiliated. But it will only convince us of Christ's divinity if we are ourselves convinced that it happened. This is to many the obstacle which makes this present line of evidence entirely futile.

Now the present writer is convinced that an unbiassed investigation of the evidence is entirely convincing, and that the fact of the Resurrection, astonishing and indeed incredible as it may seem, cannot be explained away. The explanations are all of them less credible than the idea which they try to dispose of. This has been set out in considerable detail in two books,

both written by laymen with no theological axe to grind. Indeed the first of them says that he came to the investigation of the evidence with a strong presupposition in his mind against the probability of the story, and the second is a barrister well versed in the sifting of truth. I refer now to Mr. Frank Morison's *Who Moved the Stone?* and to Mr. D. F. Brundrit's *Is the Resurrection True?*

But without going into the elaborate detail of these 'sleuths' it is really enough to ask oneself one or two fairly obvious questions. You are sure that Jesus died on Good Friday evening? Well, you wouldn't even be sure of that if the Resurrection had not happened. If anything was dead on Good Friday evening it was the faith of the disciples. God had disowned their Master and unmasked His pretensions; 'cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.' Indeed as He was dying the bystanders thought that they had heard His own admission of that fact: 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' What was it that revivified the disciples' faith and raised it to a power and intensity unreached before? These men were transformed in tone

and temper; and with a completely novel audacity defied the authorities, civil and ecclesiastical, and set out on a missionary campaign which has altered the course of history and civilization. They said the reason for this startling change was the indubitable proof that their Master had risen from the dead. At any rate, this is an adequate reason. If what they said is true it gives sufficient solution of the whole problem, and there is no other theory which solves it nearly so satisfactorily.

For once again consider the circumstances. How is it that we know anything about Jesus Christ at all? He lived in an obscure backwater of the Roman Empire, almost 'off the map,' so far as the great ones of the earth were concerned. No echo from so remote a region was ever likely to resound on the stage of history. To us the trial and death of Jesus Christ seems of immense importance; to the tenth-rate Roman governor who tried Him it probably seemed of no importance at all: and had not some quite out-of-the-way happening followed it, it would have speedily have sunk into the all-devouring ocean of oblivion. The situation might be compared to that of a

present-day occurrence in a distant province of India, in which a religious outbreak brings before the civil power a man who seems to his judges a fanatical leader who had 'got across' his co-religionists and been accused by them of mutinous language and intentions. Even with all our modern equipment of wireless and telegraph and press not a whisper of all this would ever reach us in Great Britain. The man would be executed, and would at once sink out of sight, leaving not a ripple behind to testify to his existence. This is a real parallel to what happened in Judaea in our Lord's time. How is it we know all about it, and that the names not only of the central Figure but of those who had to do with His death are remembered and are certain to be remembered to the end of time? This obscure province, and Leader, and events are better known than any others in the whole of history. Something staggering and stupendous must have occurred to account for this. The story of the Resurrection is essentially a theme in which the difficulties of unbelief are far greater than those of belief.

III

IN their belief that Jesus Christ is both perfect God and perfect Man, Christians also believe that He 'is the same, yesterday, to-day, and for ever.' That is to say, He is not only the Jesus of past history but the Christ of present experience. In dealing with this aspect of our subject we come to the epilogue, in which we state the conclusions, practical and pressing, to which our study of the historical evidence leads us. Ours has not been merely a theoretical quest. On our answer to the question we have asked depend the deepest issues of life. Is the belief of the early Church valid for us to-day? Can we trust Jesus Christ as the first disciples did? Is He still the Friend and Saviour of man? When we look at the crucifix is it only the image of a brave man involved in the tragedy of the world in which so many of our fellows are being submerged, or is it the representation of a deathless Lover,

our Contemporary, in the midst of the crosses of the world?

Of course (but we should not take it as a matter of course) the Christian answer to these queries is an unfaltering affirmation made through centuries of investigation and experiment. One of the evidences of the truth of the Christian claim is the fact of the Church's hymn-books, containing hymns ancient and modern, written by widely different types of men, in different ages, in different places, testifying to their writers' conviction of the absolute trustworthiness of Christ which they have verified in their own experience.

But in these urgent matters of life and death no second-hand knowledge, however carefully gained, will satisfy us. We demand first-hand conviction, to believe in Jesus Christ for ourselves, and not merely because somebody else has. Is His existence a fact that we can personally verify? If not, then the Person of our Lord will remain remote and shadowy, and we continue unrelieved and lonely in face of the perils which beset us. We cannot risk leaving the question unresolved, but must wrestle with

it as Jacob wrestled with the angel, until the answer becomes our own.

How, then, do we know the existence of anything? In any department of experience our conviction of the reality of an object depends on three factors, coercive, reflective, and experimental. If one or other of these factors is lacking, then our certitude lacks conviction. Take the illustration of a human friend. (*a*) If he is worthy of my trust that fact impresses itself on my consciousness with a certain compulsive force. To begin with I don't reason about it. His character makes an immediate self-authenticating appeal. (*b*) After that, I may begin to reflect in the impression which he has made upon me. I may analyse it, and discuss with myself what evidences there are for my trust being well founded. (*c*) At the same time the 'pragmatic' (or experimental) test of truth is being applied in my contacts with him, through my acceptance of what he says and my practical discovery in all sorts of ways of his reliability.

Apply all this to the Person of Christ. If He is to become real to us it will be in the same way that any other reality becomes real.

(*a*) And first of all, by the direct and convincing impression which His character makes on our consciousness as we lay our minds open to it in reading the records of it in the New Testament. If I am to know the 'Christ of experience' to-day it will be, first of all, by the coercive effect which the 'Jesus of history' makes on me. Here is where many of us fail. We suppose that we shall come to an assurance about Him through studying the books which theologians have written, instead of trying to get a first-hand impression of Him for ourselves. If we want to know the character of a great artist's work, it will not be sufficient to read books about his art. We must see it for ourselves and let it make its direct impression on us. Similarly, in the case of our Lord. But how many men who are doubtful about Him have ever made a sustained effort to read the New Testament evidence for themselves, and let it produce its own impact on mind and conscience? In order to know the true value of a picture we must look at it, long and often: and in order to know the authority of Christ we must honestly face Him, and at the same time 'face up to Him.' Is it not true to say that

Christ only remains remote and unreal when not allowed to arrest our conscience? As Dr. H. R. Mackintosh, writing for undergraduates, said:

> So long as we bring into play our intellect merely, or the reconstructive fancy of the historian, He is still far off: we need not even hold Him at arm's length; He is not close to us at all. The change comes when we take up the moral issue. If we turn to Him as men keen to gain the righteous, overcoming life, but conscious so far of failure, instantly He steps forward out of the page of history, a tremendous and exacting reality. We cannot read His greatest words, whether of command or promise, without feeling, as it has been put, that 'He not only said these things to men in Palestine, but is saying them to ourselves now.'

Just be quite sure, however, in reading these words of Dr. Mackintosh that you do not misunderstand them. He is speaking of a moral rather than a mystical experience in this direct apprehension of Christ as a present fact. He is not leading you to expect supernormal phenomena, such as visions and voices, but is pointing out that in the sphere of the *will* (that is, in the core of a man's personality) Jesus Christ affects and arrests him to-day. Of no

other historical figure is this true in a like degree.

(*b*) From this the thoughtful man will pass on to the second activity involved in the personal verification of Christ—that of reflection. That will probably lead him to the kind of investigation in which we have been engaged in this little book, which was written with the conviction that the more we investigate all that can be known about Jesus Christ the more surely we are led to the conclusion that He cannot be less than what the Church has always claimed Him to be.

(*c*) But neither intuition nor reflection by themselves will bring us to complete conviction. Doubt of any kind cannot be finally removed except by action. We gain our certainty of the trustworthiness of Christ by trusting Him, by practising His presence in our lives, and by committing ourselves seriously to His way of life. When we daily not only endeavour to obey His commands but genuinely make the experiment of relying on His power to enable us to do so, then (hesitatingly perhaps at first, but with increasing confidence as we go on) we discover that our faith authenticates itself, and that,

unseen and intangible, He is indeed there. Once again it should perhaps be stressed that this experience of the presence and power of the living Christ is not one that is normally granted to our *feelings*. The man who has it cannot usually point to moments in his life in which he was granted some supernatural evidence of his Lord's nearness, such as came to S. Paul in New Testament times and to Sadhu Sundar Singh in our own. Perhaps the most he ever has in the way of *sensible* apprehension of Christ's presence is a certain warmth of heart or sense of awe as he kneels before Him and translates the significance of the silence surrounding him by the key which he finds in the New Testament. It is not mainly in elevated moments like these that the Christian comes to his belief in Christ, but through the gradual discovery that a life lived on Christ's plan and in hourly reliance on Christ brings its own evidence of what He was and is—the Master, and Judge, and Saviour, and Friend of men.

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